DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 234 415 CS 207 859

AUTHOR Engel, Mary F.; Sawyer, Thomas M.
TITLE Contractual Revision.
PUB DATE Mar 83
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (34th, Detroit, MI, March 17-19, 1983).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Contracts; Higher Education; Peer Evaluation; Peer Teaching; *Revision (Written Composition); Student Teacher Relationship; *Teaching Methods; Tutoring; Writing Improvement; *Writing Instruction; Writing Processes
IDENTIFIERS Freshman Composition

ABSTRACT

Contractual revision promotes cooperation between teachers and tutors and, being student initiated, provides a method to increase student control over the revision process and encourage students to communicate their strengths and weaknesses in writing to their teachers or tutors. The contractual revision process requires students to form contracts specifying what methods they will employ to eliminate identified weaknesses from future writing. In these contracts the students reveal much about their understanding, or perhaps their misunderstanding, of language "rules" and consequently much about the efficacy of an instructor's own grading and evaluation criteria. While many students remain at a very mechanically oriented level of revision, a few begin to review their writing creatively, seeing the possibilities of communicating through writing, and recognizing that they can revise to say what they mean to say, and review to achieve an accurate, critical assessment of what they have said. Instructors and peer tutors provide in-progress feedback, which is much more conducive to substantive revision than student reworking of already graded essays. The contractual revision program eliminates the frustrations of an ad hoc tutoring program with irregular attendance while allowing the tutor to work closely and regularly enough to effect real student progress. (HTH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Mary F. Engel

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ED234415

CONTRACTUAL REVISION

Mary F. Engel and Thomas M. Sawyer

Revision is an essential part of writing, but, until recently, revision, which is not a part of "classical rhetoric," tended to receive significantly less emphasis than other parts of the composing process. Recent work on revision has fallen into three general categories: research on revision strategies, prescriptive approaches to instructing students in revision procedures, and discussions of peer evaluations in the revising process.[1] Although researchers have reached similar conclusions about the revision strategies of good or experienced writers compared to those of poor or inexperienced writers (good, experienced writers tend to make substantial revisions while the revisions of inexperienced writers tend to be cosmetic), discussions that focus on methods of teaching revision strategies have emphasized either teacher-initiated guidelines or peer/tutor criticism.

One approach to revision, however, synthesizes the two basic appproaches. This approach, entitled Contractual Revision, is structured in such a way that the revision process is student initiated, promotes cooperation between teacher and tutor, and provides a method whereby students can increase both their own control over the revision process and their communication of their strengths and weaknesses in writing to their teacher and/or tutor. Reactions from teachers, students, and tutors to the program of Contractual Revision have been positive because, in addition to revising their papers, the students determine their own learning objectives in the revising process and help to structure their own skill development.

CS207859

The Teacher's Perspective

For those teachers who have incorporated the program of Contractual Revision into their classes, a major benefit is that students begin to assume the responsibility for applying what their writing course is designed to teach. Contractual Revision reverses, in a sense, the all-too-standard concept of a student "revision," in that a student does not merely revise an already graded essay but proposes to approach his or her future writing in a manner that remedies some problem exhibited in an earlier essay. To facilitate this procedure, students are given at the beginning of the term a set of instructions detailing the requirements and philosophy of the program.[2]

Although the handout (see note 2) which the students receive details a revision process directed towards work unwritten, the program of Contractual Revision does not at any level imply that revision of what one has written is without value. Indeed, courses utilizing Contractual Revision are, ideally, structured in such a way as to promote ongoing and substantive revision of all work before it is ever submitted for formal evaluation.

Where the Contractual Revision process best serves both student and instructor is in its requiring students to form contracts specifying what methods they will employ to eliminate provious weaknesses from future writing. In this requirement, Contractual Revision serves as a valuable, responsive, and continuing placement program for each student. For, as the

students draft contracts specifying what problems they will seek to eliminate in their next essays, they reveal a great deal about their understanding of language, or perhaps their misunderstanding of language "rules." These contracts reveal much about the efficacy (or lack thereof) of an instructor's own grading and evaluation of student essays. For instance, a student writes the following contract: "In my first essay I had trouble using parts of the verb 'to be.' In this second essay I have tried to eliminate them and use stronger verbs like is, are, was, were." If such a contract does not teach the instructor as much about his or her own evaluation procedures as it reveals about a student's language skills, then the instructor ought not to be teaching a course in communication skills.

Other student contracts reveal a latent belief that somehow doing something over again will ensure perfection. Contracts such as the following demonstrate such a belief:

> In my first writing assignment I had some problems with word modification. In this paper I will try to be more precise. I will read my paper many times to insure proper word order.

> In my first writing assignment I used a lot of cliches. In this writing assignment I intend to leave out cliches in my rough draft. To make sure I don't have any cliches, I am going to read each sentence very carefully before the final copy so as to find and cut out any cliches.

While such contracts do not necessarily provide an immediate remedy to the problem the student seeks to solve, they do provide the instructor with

an accurate assessment of her students' current understanding of language. The process of Contractual Revision has given students a chance to assert control of their program of writing instruction and it has given the instructors a chance to perceive more directly both the efficacy of their evaluations of student writing and the progress of their students' mastery and understanding of writing. Contracts such as the following demonstrate an emerging sense of the writer's purpose and of his responsibility to his audience:

> In my second essay my conclusion did not coincide with the rest of the essay. My contract for essay number three is to read and study section 31e(2), "Concluding Paragraphs" from the textbook Harbrace College Handbook. Then I will make a checklist or outline for my ideas so that I may arrange them in some order that makes sense. This should help me to write a concluding paragraph properly.

> In my third essay I didn't use examples to strengthen my opinion. In my fourth essay I am going to give specific examples of things I want my readers to visualize. Then, after I have written my rough draft, I will check my essay to make sure I have solved my problem by having used relevant examples.

Many students, of course, remain at a very mechanically oriented level of revision. They perceive language and writing systems to be mastered, to be gotten "right." A few students, however, have begun to review their writing creatively, to see the possibilities of communicating through their

writing, and to recognize that they can revise their own writing to say what they mean it to say, that they can review their own writing and achieve an accurate, critical assessment of what they have said. There are still several students who do not believe that anything should be written more than once, who will mutter, when confronted with an essay "graded" a C-, "But you know what I meant. . .." They could be referred to their colleague, a 35 year old nursing major who jokingly complains: "This course is really getting to me; I rewrite my patient care summaries four times before I put them on the charts."

This nursing student has begun to perceive revision in terms of its creative possibilities. She is also a student who utilizes to its fullest the second approach to revision, one which supplements that of Contractual Revision: an ongoing series of conferences and workshop-based evaluations of writing progress which are designed to help the writer to re-see and then to revise what he has already written.

The availability of instructor and peer criticism of writing in progress proves significantly more productive of substantive revision than does a system in which revision amounts to students' reworking of already graded essays. Such a substantive revision process, one that entails actual and effective re-viewing, re-seeing of what one has written, is not what most students commonly think of as revision. Nancy Sommers, who surveyed the attitudes of both student writers and professional writers toward revision, notes that "student writers [those in the 450-650 SAT range] view the revision process primarily as a rewording activity." They talk of revision as "scratch out and do over again," "reviewing" (for "better" words), "redoing," and "marking out" ("Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers"). Sommers also remarks that

"the students place symbolic importance on their selection and rejection of words as the determiners of success or failure for their compositions. . . . They approach the revision process with what could be labeled as a 'thesaurus philosophy of writing'; the students consider the thesaurus a harvest of lexical substitutions and believe that most problems in their essays can be solved by rewording" (Sommers, p. 381).

Sommers notes that the student writers she surveyed work largely "without a sense of the developmental possibilities of revision" and seek merely "to clean up their language and prepare to type," though they "are aware of lexical repetition." While students in Sommers' study could perceive lexical repetition and at times lexical inappropriateness, many students of lower verbal aptitude remain at the level of considering revision as an exercise in perceiving grammatical errors, only occasionally advancing to the point of being able to distinguish an inappropriate (or ineffective) use of language. They frequently demonstrate their assumption (or belief) that language is a finite science whose rules can be mastered and applied in some preordained (if mysteriously inaccessible) form. Thus, many such students approach revision with a significantly less developed awareness of the possibilities of written language than do the students who participated in Sommers' study.

Because many students approach revision of graded essays armed only with a fistful of bandaids, such revisions are almost invariably ineffective. Therefore, the Contractual Revision program discourages revision of already evaluated essays. Rather, it suggests (and sometimes requires) that students confer with instructors, with their peers, and possibly with their tutors, receiving audience response and suggestions for revision <u>before</u> a paper is submitted. Many students, among them the

nursing student mentioned earlier, solicit comments at various levels of the writing process: pre-writing, topic restriction, review of first draft, second draft, etc. These students begin to approach the sense of revision shared by published writers who "tell us that the endless discipline of crafting and recrafting prose leads to the discovery of what one has to say and how it can be said" (Michael C. Flanigan and Diane S. Menendez, "Perception and Change: Teaching Revision," p. 256).

Students' frequent failures to revise their writing by any substantive measure is probably a measure of their expectations of what we, their English teachers, "want." If our evaluation of their written work consists largely of marginalia attesting to grammatical and lexical errors, then students might logically assume that the process of revision involves little more than affixing a few "bandaids," i.e., "corrections," to those errors identified by the teacher's pen. Yet, as Norman Frey has noted, "The postmortem [Frey's term for the 'bleeding essay'] as the major method of teaching composition encourages the student to be a passive observer of composition rather than an active participant in the process of creating and composing." [3]

A dual view of the revision process--one that encourages students to continually revise and re-see what they have written, and one that also requires them to determine contractually what past weaknesses they will eliminate from future writing--serves as both an on-going diagnostic tool and as an effective challenge for students to write as well as they can. For students who seek peer review of their work and for students who request tutorial assistance, the program of "contractual revisions" provides a method and a frame within which effective peer or tutorial counselling can occur.

The Tutor's Perspective

For many students in basic writing and freshman-level composition courses, the assignments they encounter motivate them to seek assistance from a tutor as well as from their instructor. At many institutions, some tutorial assistance--either in the form of a writing clinic or a general learning center--is available. Tutoring in the Learning Center of Northern Montana College differs from tutoring in many other learning centers, writing labs, or writing clinics because it is not a drop-in program; the student and the tutor meet at a definitely scheduled time for two hours per week, usually every other day. The student is expected to supplement his tutoring with work on individualized study programs which are set up for him. The basic principle behind this bilateral approach is that a student can work on improving some elements of writing (specifically, mechanical elements like capitalization and spelling), while it is much more effective to spend the tutor's time on more difficult writing problems, problems involving organization and revisions, problems involving human feedback.

The tutors appreciate the individualized programs because the programs can help to free the tutors from rote mechanical review (from becoming proofreaders), and the program of Contractual Revision emphasizes this even more. Moreover, the students seem to value the assistance of the tutors for many of the reasons other supervisors of tutors have indicated. As Kenneth Bruffee has noted, the use of peer tutors encourages collaborative learning, which may be anomalous and exciting in an institutional system where "Officially, students are anonymous to one another, and isolated."

Thom Hawkins believes this collaboration can help floundering students because it offers the students a personal contact, often with a peer.[4]

Regardless of how well the tutor functions as counselor or friend, some aspects of the tutoring arrangement, in and of themselves, promote better writing. Hawkins also makes two significant points about the difference between the student-tutor relationship and the student-teacher relationship. First, many teachers evaluate only the product of the student's efforts (the paper turned in for a grade), while the tutor works with the student's writing process. Second, because the tutor is working with the process and not evaluating the product, the student can experiment with her writing without fear of being penalized. Because the tutor is present during the creative process (even if only to help revise the paper), the tutor can provide a valuable service the teacher cannot: immediate feedback, immediate reactions to the student's experiments, which James Moffet says is the ideal method for improving student writing.[5]

By giving the student immediate feedback, by functioning as an intermediate audience, the tutor gives the student more information about and perception of the needs of an audience. During the composing process, the tutor should help the student realize the limitations of jargon or slang in addition to requiring more specificity for vague terms (either one could easily be adopted as a Contractual Revision). Moreover, by working with a tutor, the student can realize that revision is not merely applying band-aids to a seriously wounded essay: revision is, as the word suggests, a process of seeing again, of rediscovering. As Nancy Sommers concludes, experienced writers see revision as a recursive process; in other words, the essay is in a state of flux and is constantly modified, reordered, and reviewed according to its needs. Experienced writers go through cycles of

revision, not merely a rewrite. The Contractual Revision program allows the student to help develop his own revision strategy, in other words, a Contractual Revision helps the student (or the tutor and the student) to emulate the writing practice of experienced writers.

In his description of the writing process as "growing" and "cooking," Peter Elbow clearly indicates the importance of interaction between people as a part of the "cooking" process, part of the percolating of ideas:

> Two heads are better than one because two heads can make conflicting material interact better than one head usually can. It's why brainstorming works. I say something. You give a response and it constitutes some restructuring or reorienting of what I said. Then I see something new on the basis of your restructuring and so I, in turn, can restructure what I first said. The process provides continual leverage or mechanical advantage: we successively climb upon the shoulders of each other's restructuring, so that at each climbing up, we can see a little farther. (Writing Without Teachers [New York: Oxford University Press, 1973], pp. 49-50.)

As an experienced writer, the tutor offers the student the wisdom of an experienced cook, someone who has revised, not merely rewritten or corrected his or her own writing. The tutor can demonstrate that the writing process is more than just defrosting cold ideas or recording speech, that creativity involves the whole writing process, and that writing is more than transcription following inspiration.

Beyond all this, the Contractual Revision program has a major advantage: it promotes cooperation rather than competition between the

teacher and the tutor. As Kenneth Bruffee notes, this can be a major stumbling block in peer tutoring programs:

> At every level where peer tutoring is brought into a school, some faculty tend to resist the notion of it. The resistance seems to have something to do with the way we perceive ourselves as teachers, as purveyors of knowledge. And there's resistance to the idea that other people will be involved in the learning process of "my" students, that kind of thing. Faculty attitudes to peer tutoring is one of the two cutting edges of work in this field.[6]

The Contractual Revision program overcomes this potential problem because the teachers retain ultimate control over the whole learning process, and the tutors function as assistants to the faculty member, not as rivals. Consequently, faculty support and endorsement of the tutoring program tends to increase as a result of greater experience with it. In turn, faculty members will tend to recommend tutors to help the students; furthermore, these faculty members recommend tutorial assistance for students, and, as a means for improving students writing, to other faculty members who teach writing.

Moreover, the Contractual Revision program can help tutors avoid the frustrations of an ad hoc tutoring program that has irregular attendance. Because the student's revision contract is tied to following papers, the student is encouraged to meet regularly with one tutor. However, when tutors have regularly scheduled meetings with students planned, the tutors sometimes feel pressure to "instruct" the student, which can be difficult, especially after the student has just turned in a paper or had a major

test. The Contractual Revision program gives the tutors a helpful framework for assisting the students. If a student has turned in a paper and claims no work is due, the tutor can always work with the student on developing the next contract for revision or work with the student on evaluating how well the terms of the previous contract were met. The tutor has more flexibility within this potentially more restrictive system: the tutor can get out of the role of being merely a copy editor or a topic developer. Furthermore, the tutor can refer the student to programmed texts and to reference materials, so that the student can develop the skills necessary to apply, correctly, the contract written. Such an approach overcomes a common complaint of many writing tutors: they do not have the chance to work with the student, for enough time or in a structured enough program, to see any real progress.

The self-created structure of the student's revising process in the Contractual Revision program makes the student a more active participant in the entire writing process. Instead of feeling overwhelmed with a sense of inadequacy as a writer, a student can use this program to develop an individual and incremental approach towards the improvement of his writing. Instead of being asked to take care of all the wounds in a "bleeding" essay at once, the student is asked to develop her own triage system, to selectively focus on correcting certain writing breakdowns and then advance to other, presumably less serious, problems. Furthermore, the Contractual Revision system offers to anyone assisting the student in the diagnosis and treatment of the wounded writing a systematic and effective means of administering care.

Notes

1 For recent research on revision see the following: Richard Beach, "Self-Evaluation Strategies of Extensive Revisers and Nonrevisers," College Composition and Communication, 27 (May 1976), 160-64; Carolyn Boiarsky, "Cut-and-Paste and Other Revision Activities," English Journal, 69 (November 1980), pp. 44-48; Lillian Bridwell, "Revising Strategies in Twelfth-Grade Students' Transactional Writing," Research in the Teaching of English, 14 (October 1980), 197-222; Lester Faigley and Stephen Witte, "Analyzing Revision," College Composition and Communication, 32 (December 1981), 400-14; Donald M. Murray, "Internal Revision: A Process of Discovery" in Research on Composing: Points of Departure, eds. Charles R. Cooper and Lee Odell (Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1978), pp. 85-103; Nancy Sommers, "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers," College Composition and Communication, 31 (December 1980), 378-88.

Numerous articles on prescriptive techniques for revision or means of teaching revision exist. Among recent ones are the following: Donald Cunningham and G. Ronald Dobler, "Teaching by the Numbers: An Exercise in Organization and Revision," Exercise Exchange (Fall 1977), pp. 36-40; Charles P. Duke, "An Approach to Revision and Evaluation of Student Writing," Ohio Language Arts Bulletin (Winter 1980), pp. 19-24; Michael C. Flanigan and Diane S. Menendez, "Perception and Change: Teaching Revision," College English, 42 (November 1980), 256-66; Barbara Hansen, "Rewriting is

a Waste of Time," College English, 39 (April 1978), 956-60; Dan R. Kirby and Tom Liner, "Revision: Yes, They Do It; Yes, You Can Teach It," English Journal, 69 (March 1980), 41-45; Richard Lanham, Revising Prose (New York: Scribner's, 1979); W. U. McDonald, Jr., "The Revising Process and the Marking of Student Papers," College Composition and Communication, 29 (May 1978), 167-70.

Discussions of peer evaluations and the revision process can be found in the following articles: Mary H. Beaven, "Individualized Goal Setting, Self-Evaluation, and Peer Evaluation" in Evaluating Writing: Describing, Measuring, Judging, eds. Charles R. Cooper and Lee Odell (Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teaachers of English, 1977), pp. 135-56; Walter J. Lamberg, "Self-provided and Peer-provided Feedback," College Composition and Communication, 31 (February 1980), 63-69; Barbara J. Newman, "Peer Evaluation in Teaching Composition," Ohio English Language Arts Bulletin (Winter/Spring 1980), pp. 61-64; Levin Peckham, "Peer Evaluation," English Journal, 67 (October 1978), 61-63.

The best general collection on revising is Revising: New Essays for Teachers of Writing, ed. Ronald A. Sudol (Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English and ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills, 1982).

2 In this class you are expected to become an active participant in the process of designing an individual program for improving your writing skills. It will be your instructor's responsibility to read your writing assignments carefully and to evaluate each piece for writing on the levels of logic, organization, accuracy, grammar, and style. Once you have received your graded essay, it will be your responsibility to undertake two

(and, in some cases, three) approaches to eliminate any deficiencies in your written work.

The first task you must pursue is to study the comments on your graded essay; these comments should help you understand which areas of your writing need improvement. While your instructor will not accept revisions of already graded work, it will help you to eliminate problems in your future essays if you rework those portions of your essay requiring restructuring. If you receive a grade of C- or below on any essay, it is strongly recommended that you meet with your instructor to discuss the revisions you have made on your graded essay.

After revising your already graded essay, you should identify one area in which you have demonstrated recurring difficulty, and you should then propose a method whereby you can avoid such a problem in your next essay. You will need to formulate a very precise "contract" in which you establish your own goals for solving the problem so identified. (Note: papers 2 through 8 will not be accepted unless they have such a contract attached to the essay.) A sample contract might read as follows: "In my first essay, I presented a thesis which had little relation to the rest of my paper. In my second essay, I am going to make a list of the details which are necessary to prove my thesis. Then, after I have written the first draft of my essay, I will read through the essay and either eliminate irrelevant details or modify my thesis to accomodate them." A very vague and imprecise contract, such as the following one, will not be acceptable or effective: "In my first essay, I had a problem with verb tense. In my second essay I will not use verb tense."

Please evaluate your contract to make sure that you have proposed a workable method whereby you can execute it. Simply saying that you will

have a friend read your paper, that you will get a tutor, or that you will stop making a particular mistake, will most likely not help you fulfill your contract. The method you propose should incorporate some awareness of the nature of the weakness you propose to eliminate, and it should specifically address the situation in which this weakness manifests itself. For example, if you repeatedly have a problem with incorrect pronoun reference, you will need to determine both what pronoun reference involves and what specific difficulties you seem to have in using pronouns; you will need to propose a method which, at the very least, will involve the identification of the pronouns you have used and the correlation between those pronouns and the words to which they refer.

One method whereby you can check to see whether you have fulfilled your contract is the following: place an asterisk (*) in the margin to the left of any line or paragraph in which you feel you have done what your contract promised you would do.

Your second through eighth papers will receive two grades each: one grade for the essay as a whole, and one grade for the formulation and execution of the contract. It is expected that your contract will change from paper to paper, and that, during the course of the quarter, you will be able to devise a program which will enable you to eliminate most areas of weakness from your writing.

The third approach to the process of revision is strongly recommended for any student earning a C- or below on his written work. Such a student should seek tutorial assistance from the Learning Center. Students whose work earns a C or above may also utilize the services of the Center; the only requirement is that you desire to receive tutorial assistance, and that you are willing to make a commitment of at least two hours per week to

the tutoring process. Should you request a tutor, you will be assigned one tutor who will work with you throughout the quarter. You should inform your tutor that you are working under a program of Contractual Revision. Your tutor can not revise or write your papers for you, but the tutor can help you propose and refine your contract; he or she may also assist you as you evaluate the execution of your contract.

3 "Teaching Before the Composition is Written" in They Really Taught Us How To Write, ed. Patricia Geuder et al (Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1974), pp. 6-9.

4 "Collaborative Learning: Some Practical Models," College English, 34 (Febraury 1973), 636; "Intimacy and Audience: The Relationship between Revision and the Social Dimension of Peer Tutoring," College English, 42 (September 1980), 64-68.

5 "Learning to Write by Writing" in Teaching the Universe of Discourse (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), pp. 193-95.

6 "Training and Using Peer Tutors [Discusion Section]," College English, 40 (December 1978), pp. 443-44. Martha Maxwell also sees this as a common problem for tutoring programs in Improving Student Learning Skills: A Comprehensive Guide to Successful Practices and Programs for Increasing the Performance of Underprepared Students (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1980), p. 154.